



© Tanayoch-AdobeStock

LIGHTS - Innovation/Entrepreneurship

Romantic relationships: Future challenges in the era of dating apps

ESCP Impact Paper No.2024-23-EN

Perrine DESMICHEL & Laetitia MIMOUN
ESCP Business School

[Romantic relationships: Future challenges in the era of dating apps

Perrine Desmichel*

Laetitia Mimoun**

ESCP Business School

Abstract

It has been over a decade since dating applications arrived in Europe from the United States, significantly impacting European practices and beliefs regarding romantic relationships. In this article, we look back at the adoption of dating apps in Europe, focusing both on the ideological shifts and resistance among European users, and we draw forecasts for the coming years.

Keywords: Dating apps; Consumerism; Societal Change; Consumer Ideologies

*Assistant Professor of Marketing, ESCP Business School, Paris campus

**Associate Professor of Marketing, ESCP Business School, Paris campus

ESCP Impact Papers are in draft form. This paper is circulated for the purposes of comment and discussion only. Hence, it does not preclude simultaneous or subsequent publication elsewhere. ESCP Impact Papers are not refereed. The form and content of papers are the responsibility of individual authors. ESCP Business School does not bear any responsibility for the views expressed in the articles. Copyright for the paper is held by the individual authors.

Romantic relationships: Future challenges in the era of dating apps

Dating apps were born in the United States, with Tinder in 2012, and have quickly invaded the European market ever since, contributing to a deep societal change in romantic relationships. In Europe, online dating services have now recruited around 77 million users (88 million expected by 2028) and generated 624 million USD in 2023 with no signs of slowing down (Statista 2023a, 2023b).

At first, dating apps had a sulphurous reputation for corrupting morals (or at least transforming societal norms), as illustrated by this *Guardian* article in 2014, in which a Tinder user explained: “How Tinder took me from serial monogamy to casual sex” (Moore 2014). Interestingly, over the years dating apps have successfully transformed their reputation, transitioning from a service seen as only facilitating casual encounters to a mainstream platform also promising access to love or serious relationships. It is now common to come across an article listing the best applications to ‘find love’, and today ten percent of serious relationships or marriages started on a dating site or app (Sales 2023). Dating apps have therefore become complex service providers that promise to satisfy a wide variety of consumers’ needs, ranging from one-night stands to marriage with kids.

Dating apps therefore appear as interesting consumption contexts where conflicting aspirations and beliefs co-exist. Sociologists established that consumers can uphold two conflicting ideologies on these apps (Illouz 2021). On one hand, individuals may embrace a romanticized view of love, rooted in the pursuit of a unique and enduring connection with a life partner (i.e., pre-modern view). On the other hand, they may adopt a consumerist ideology, which emphasizes maximum personal freedom, for instance by multiplying sexual partners and experiences (i.e., post-modern view).

Building on this first observation, we study how consumers react to the coexistence of antagonistic visions, goals, and practices.

We have noticed a phenomenon of cyclical dissatisfaction and resistance to the apps. The usage cycles include a conversion phase as consumers embrace the consumerist ideology even if it sometimes diverges from their personal ideological view on love. As they change their own dating practices to match the ones promoted by the consumerist ideology (e.g., polygamous dating), they experience ideological conflict which eventually reaches a climax before leading to a second phase of ideological resistance and the abandonment of dating apps. Yet, consumers go back to dating apps after temporary breaks, once again seduced by their promises.

In this short article, we rely on media data to study (i) how dating apps have been presented in France over the past eight years; and (ii) how app resistance has gained importance, (iii) to later forecast how the dating apps market may evolve in the coming years.

Media listening analysis

For this analysis, we extracted the 565 press articles published about dating apps in France between 2015 and 2023 using Bilbio Euro Press database. We limited our extraction to the ten most read outlets in this country (e.g., *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Parisien*) and ran the search with the six most common terms for dating apps in French as keywords (i.e., “applications de rencontre,” “application de rencontre,” “app de rencontre,” “apps de rencontre,” “applis de rencontre,” “appli de rencontre”).

We reviewed the existing literature on dating apps to identify key drivers of their socio-cultural acceptance/rejection. This helped us identify three themes (i.e., romantic love, consumerism, and app resistance) that shape structural discourses on dating apps. Next, we screened the abstracts of each media article and listed the words related to these pre-identified themes in order of occurrence.

For each theme, we kept the ten most frequently mentioned words and asked a research assistant to compute frequencies for each of them (including word stems, e.g., “finding love,” “to find love,” and “finds love” were all counted under the word “finding love”) in the whole dataset. We studied the **frequency ratio**, by dividing the number of keyword occurrences by the number of pages of articles. Based on this analysis and our grounding in the academic literature, we explore how the perception of dating apps in France has evolved over the past decade.

Three dominant themes

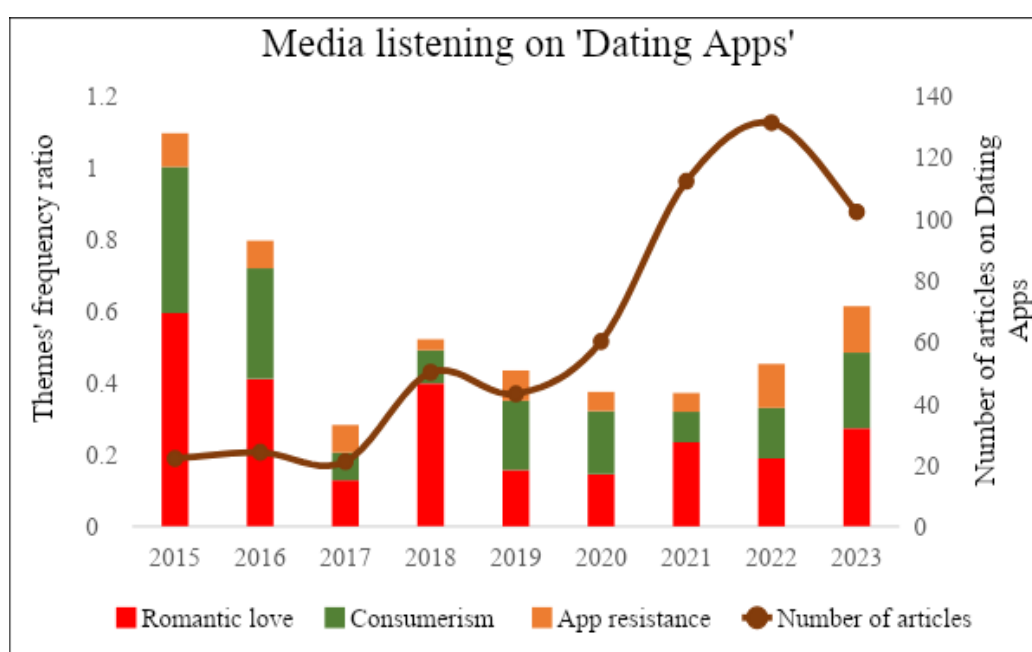
We studied the three following themes, each captured in ten focal keywords.

Romantic love. The media nurture the idea that dating apps can be used to ‘find love’. In this theme we counted the mentions of keywords such as “finding love,” “looking for love,” “love at first sight,” “marriage,” “commitment,” and “soulmate.”

Consumerism. The media also present dating apps as a ‘market’ (mainly for sexual encounters). In this theme, we included keywords such as “supermarket,” “Uber for sex,” “one-night stand,” and “dehumanization.”

App resistance. Importantly, we noticed that dating apps are also associated with what Judith Duportail labeled ‘dating fatigue’ (Duportail 2021). The app resistance is characterized by keywords such as “dating fatigue,” “unsubscribe,” “disillusion,” “disenchanted,” and “rejection” (of the apps).

Figure 1. Analysis of press articles on dating apps (in France, between 2015 and 2023).



We derive three main takeaways from this media listening analysis (cf. Figure 1):

- The attention to the dating app phenomenon during the **pandemic**
- The **defeat of the romantic vision** of dating apps
- The rise of some **societal resistance**

2015-2023 trends

The attention to the dating app phenomenon. In 2022, dating apps were referenced in six times more articles than in 2015 (before recording a slowdown in 2023). This confirms that European societies have undergone significant shifts in their dating practices, garnering heightened media attention. We also observed a peak during the pandemic when social isolation and loneliness were intensified by the lockdown conditions and app-based communication reached an all-high across social domains. However, the coverage of the dating app topic has evolved over time.

The defeat of the romantic vision. In 2015, the frequency ratio of references to 'romantic love' approximated 60%, but fell below 20% in 2017, 2019, and 2022. This means that while 'romantic love' used to be the predominant association with dating apps in the media, it has now become of secondary importance. In 2019 and 2020, terms related to 'consumerism' even gained more presence than terms related to 'romantic love' in the articles we analyzed. The takeaway is twofold. First, as dating apps became a more mainstream phenomenon, the media increasingly gave attention to a variety of issues (such as fear of scams on these apps) beyond what was assumed to be their first purpose (i.e., romantic love). Second, society has accepted that dating apps could promote other types of practices and relationships, without necessarily leading to love and commitment (e.g., polyamory).

Societal resistance. The press has documented the dangers or limits of dating apps, such as the emergence of dehumanized behaviors (e.g., ghosting), leading to users' depression or 'dating fatigue' (Nicolle and Guelmami 2022). In our ongoing study, we realized that dating app users are reluctant to fully embrace a consumerist vision of relationships. On the contrary, their usage of the apps is tenuous: it starts with a high degree of uncertainty, continues with an ego boost, which encourages a more intense usage of the app, until this ego is threatened by other users' misbehaviors, leading to disengagement with the app. App users can endure several cycles before giving up the apps completely.

Latest evolutions that should continue in the next decade

The end of excitement and the normalization

The usage of dating apps has become increasingly normalized in Europe. The recent decrease in media coverage of this topic reveals the increasing legitimacy (Humphreys 2010) of dating apps. What was once considered a relatively niche or stigmatized way of meeting potential partners has now become a mainstream method of dating for many people. We, for instance, noted in our ongoing study that young adults no longer hide this practice from their parents. Overall, while the normalization of dating apps has democratized the dating process and provided new opportunities for connection, it also comes with challenges and potential drawbacks. While dating apps are still recruiting new users, the period of abundance may be over as consumers tried dating apps for the novelty. The market has reached maturity. If this excitement phase is over, the dating app market

will become even more competitive. The current increase in market fragmentation seems to suggest that competition will keep increasing in this market.

The fragmentation of the dating app market

The dating app market is becoming increasingly fragmented. Initially dominated by a few major players like Tinder, Bumble, and Happn, the market has seen a proliferation of niche dating apps catering to specific demographics, interests, and preferences, such as religious affiliation, ethnicity, age group, sexual orientation, or even hobbies like fitness or music. These apps offer a more tailored experience for users seeking partners who share their values or interests. Further, as societal attitudes toward dating and relationships evolve, so do the needs and preferences of users. The fragmentation of the dating app market reflects the maturity of the market but also the diverse ways in which people seek companionship and connection in the digital age. Moreover, in reaction to the market resistance, we may see appearing specific apps for each need. For example, apps offering romantic love could become separated from those offering sexual encounters (or friendship). While this would allow clearer matching of consumers' expectations, the risk for stigma associated with the more casual platforms is great. In terms of business models, we could see the emergence of more premium options for serious and qualitative relationships.

The slow dating trend

App resistance discourses and criticisms of app-based consumerism have led to the emergence of a new practice: slow dating. Slow dating is about being intentional, patient, and mindful in the dating process, with the goal of forming meaningful connections that have the potential to grow into fulfilling relationships over time. Unlike the current view of app-based dating where people may seek to accumulate matches and quickly move from one love prospect to the next, slow dating encourages a more mindful approach. Slow dating has gained traction in response to the fast-paced nature of modern dating culture, which often involves swiping through profiles rapidly and engaging in casual hookups. While slow dating often involves stepping back from the rapid-fire swiping and messaging common on dating apps, technology may still play a role in facilitating meaningful connections. Future dating apps may incorporate features that support slow dating, such as curated matches based on compatibility and shared interests as well as features that support mindfulness and mental health in dating. Specialized apps targeting this trend are also emerging (e.g., Once, Timeleft) and may gain in popularity.

Conclusion

Overall, this media listening analysis is rich in insights about the trends of the dating app market. In an ongoing project, we will complement the media data with interviews and extended diaries of app users. While this market has become mature in Europe in the past decade, we do not expect this phenomenon to fade away but rather to gain complexity and nuances.

References

Duportail, J. (2021). *Dating Fatigue*. Eds. L'Observatoire.

Humphreys, A. (2010). Semiotic structure and the legitimation of consumption practices: The case of casino gambling. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(3), 490-510.

Illouz, E. (2021). *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. Eds. Oxford University Press.

Nicolle, F. and, Z. (2023). Pourquoi les applications de rencontre nous déshumanisent-elles ?. *The Conversation*, July 26. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/pourquoi-les-applications-de-rencontre-nous-deshumanisent-elles-184672>

Sales (2023). Relationships that begin online are less stable – I've seen it time and time again. *The Guardian*, November 18. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/18/relationships-online-mates>

Statistica (2023a). Revenue of the online dating industry in Europe 2018-2028. Retrieved from: <https://www-statista-com.revproxy.escpeurope.eu/statistics/1358050/online-dating-revenue-europe/>

Statistica (2023b). Number of online dating service users in Europe from 2018 to 2028. Retrieved from:

<https://www-statista-com.revproxy.escpeurope.eu/forecasts/1358174/europe-number-of-online-dating-users>